



Paper Tapestries: The Marsh Drawings of Nancy Cohen

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Nancy Cohen, *Marsh Drawing (roundabout)*, 2016, 84 x 180 inches, handmade paper, rubber, resin. Photo: Leslie Sheryl.

FACING PAGE: Nancy Cohen, *Hackensack Dreaming Drawing*, 2015, 112 x 90 inches, handmade paper, rubber, resin. Photo: Edward Fausty.

We often think of paper and textiles to be distinct. Nancy Cohen's large paper murals *Marsh Drawing (roundabout)* and *Hackensack Dreaming Drawing*—exhibited at Urban Glass in Brooklyn, New York, in the fall of 2016—expose an essential compatibility between these two mediums. Cohen's murals are made of paper fiber: large, manipulated sheets which she herself constructs, then layers, and sometimes mends, as she depicts the Hackensack riverscape she is drawn to. These dimensional drawings are a textile geography of muted blues, browns and greens, pleats and wrinkles, punctuated by articulated organic lines and biological forms.

The marsh ecology of the metropolitan New Jersey/New York river system, and its constant state of flux, has been an inspiration for Cohen for more than a decade. The native flora is constantly forced to accommodate new species, forces, and human debris. Fittingly, paper is formed by the repeated agitation and compression of fibers, which cause a reorganizing of structure. When shaken, the long, parallel gestures inherent to plant fiber or hair are released from their lateral order, and reweave themselves into a dense, matted terrain.

Cohen's drawings call forth the idea of tapestry. The murals' authoritative drape and physicality maintain the heft and dignity of traditional woven tapestries, like those found insulating the walls of drafty castles. Traditional tapestry is a woven fabric, which relies on the structure of warp and weft. A vertical loom is strung with weighted warp threads, while weft threads traverse across.



Historically, tapestries are weft-facing constructions, though the warp armature remains intrinsic to the design. The weft face allows for clear, pictorial narrative. Cohen's murals are not in this sense 'woven,' yet their reference to tapestry is clear; their posture, their scale, and their function as tableaux form the visual context of traditional tapestry.

The forms and images depicted here, as Cohen layers and works her already-sculpted surface, reference the objects—both natural and man-made—found in the Hackensack riverscape. The marsh is a complicated ecology of mutated forms. Cohen re-wets the surface, adding pulp to pulp. The skin buckles, dries taut, alters itself literally and metaphorically. As in the marsh, biological events happen here, and it is challenging to keep the terrain sound. The impetus for the works, notes Cohen, was to present an "approach" to the vista.¹ Something we can contemplate before entering.

Cohen's expansive *Marsh Drawings* proffer this landscape as an armature, as a warp onto which the artist can pictorially weave her findings. Her weft threads stand for years of noticing, a horizontal traipsing back and forth through the marsh as she intuitively annotates, catalogs, and records. A rupturing of the swamp's surface, perhaps by her own boot or hand, reiterates on the surface of the paper, with interruptions of cellulose fibers being asked to make room for—or mutate into—new organic forms. The result is a merger of setting and discovery, a tapestry that documents and invites us into a woven experience of cloth, paper, and landscape.

NOTES

1. Nancy Cohen, in discussion with the author, November 3, 2016.